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SUBJECT: CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: BLAME UNHCR

REF: STATE 82712

1. (SBU) Summary. The GVN officially blames UNHCR for having caused the April 10-11 demonstrations in the Central Highlands by "organizing" illegal crossings of Montagnards and granting them asylum. Ambassador sharply criticized this "farfetched" notion, stressing the local conditions in the Central Highlands that had caused unhappiness, and stressing the legal mandate of UNHCR, which the RCG itself had an obligation to support and respect. The MFA promised to "try" to facilitate a trip to the Central Highlands by missionoffs within the next week. It is striking that the GVN has clearly decided not to attempt to blame the U.S., or even specifically groups in the U.S., for the recent troubles. End Summary.

Back to normal

2. (U) In a meeting on April 14 with Assistant Foreign Minister and Americas Department Director General Nguyen Duc Hung, Ambassador delivered refel talking points on the Central Highlands, highlighting "intense" U.S. and international interest and concern. AFM Hung admitted "disturbances" on April 10 and 11 in the three provinces of Dak Lak, Dak Rong, and Gia Lai, in which groups of Montagnards had been "incited" to oppose local authorities and engage in acts of violence, leading to clashes with public security officials. He said he did not have information on injuries, deaths, or arrests, but promised to "try" to obtain such information. He further claimed attacks on and destruction of public offices in "a number of districts." He claimed that local authorities "persuaded" demonstrators to return home and that the situation had now "returned to normal" and that "order has been restored."

UNHCR's fault

3. (SBU) AFM Hung attributed the causes of the demonstrations to "interference," notably due to the attempts of the UNHCR representative in Cambodia to organize "illegal border crossings" without the knowledge of the RCG. He noted that the RCG itself viewed such actions as a violation of its sovereignty and as "illegal people smuggling," and therefore had ordered the closure of the UNHCR office in Rattanakiri. In anticipation of imminent flight out of Vietnam, Hung further claimed, many Montagnard families had recently sold their houses and land, and there were even rumors that U.S. airplanes would even come to the Central Highland to pick up people wishing to leave. AFM Hung reaffirmed GVN policy of "national unity" and promotion of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom.

4. (SBU) Ambassador called the allegations against UNHCR as an "insult" to an organization that was fulfilling its legal mandate, which the RCG had an obligation to assist as a signatory to the Refugee Convention. He noted that in fact only a small number of Montagnards had been able to cross the border and made it with difficulty to Phnom Penh to request asylum. He called it "farfetched" that the UNHCR office had the slightest role in inciting these demonstrations. He complained that there have been repeated reports over the past year of efforts by Cambodian officials to catch Montagnards seeking asylum in Cambodia and returning them to Vietnam, often in cooperation with Vietnamese security offices and often in return for bounty payments, he continued. He warned the GVN against encouraging the RCG to avoid its international responsibilities and obligations.

5. (SBU) AFM Hung claimed that, while Vietnamese laws were not "perfect," the GVN would still enforce its laws about crossing without permission; freedom of movement was only valid for internal travel. Ambassador stressed that such crossings were a legal matter for Cambodia, not Vietnam.

Long-time problem; access needed

6. (U) Ambassador emphasized that the situation in the

Central Highlands would remain difficult for a long time, due to unhappiness over land tenure, income disparities, discrimination, and interference with religious practice, which made many Montagnards wish to seek asylum. He noted that the USG was willing to cooperate to ensure orderly programs for those who did wish to leave, and that escape across the border remained an "escape value" for those who could not leave otherwise, an option the GVN should allow.

17. (U) Ambassador urged renewed access to the Central Highlands. AFM Hung said that since the situation was "normal," people were free to go there again. Ambassador said that another Embassy/ConGen team would try to go again within a week in that case; such a reporting trip would help greatly better to understand the situation and to re-institute openness and reciprocity. He noted that, when there was no access, people tend to believe the worst. AFM Hung promised to "try" to ensure access for the Mission team by "creating conditions" for them to go.

18. (U) Ambassador reiterated USG respect for Vietnam's sovereignty, and AFM Hung acknowledged that the USG did not support the Dega movement, and that its position on Vietnam's sovereignty was "clear." He added that the GVN recognized USG "restraint" and "understanding."

19. (SBU) Comment: Unlike 2001, the GVN has clearly decided against laying the blame at the door of the U.S., and in this discussion at least did not even belabor the role of US-based groups. The attack on UNHCR is misguided and troubling, however, but demonstrates once again the perceived GVN need to have an outside enemy to blame for internal problems.
BURGHARDT